



## DYNAMICS OF HISTORY, POLITICS AND SOCIETY IN MANIPURI MEITEI POETRY IN ENGLISH

Ph. Sanamacha Sharma

Assistant Professor, DM College of Commerce, Dhanamanjuri University

### ABSTRACT

This paper will attempt to locate four Manipuri poets in English in the ever-changing volatile landscape of history, politics and society of Manipur. Poetry of the four male poets' concerns will be discussed in terms of their involvement in political culture of Manipur from two perspectives relating to contemporary history of Manipur. First one will be about poets' anxieties associated with problems like tensions of democracy, insurgency, drugs, etc. encountered by them in their own backyard, and the second one will dwell on those poets who are living as migrants in other states and their issues like unemployment and nostalgia for their birthplace. In both ways, the changing faces of Manipur, real or imagined, haunt their poetic outputs.

**KEYWORDS:** Democracy, Insurgency, Drug, Northeast Migrant

### INTRODUCTION

1. Despite the rise of the educated middle-class and growing popularity of English language in Manipur, only a few writers use English as their medium of literary creativity. Manipur had been under British rule for over 50 years. During this period, English was a part of official (clerical) language and, except for a few words and sentences, it failed to be a major part of the living native language of Manipuri people. The popularity of English language came only with the increase in literacy rate in post-independent Manipur, after its merger with India. Manipuri poetry in English is only a recent phenomenon. Only a few of them are seen in the last three decades, quite minimal, as compared to those writing in mother tongue. Nevertheless, their contribution is still historically, politically and culturally important. Rather than approaching them as Manipuri English Poets, I will locate them in the ever-changing volatile landscape of history, politics and society of Manipur as Meitei English poets keeping in mind cultural differences as Meitei is (though it is the dominant one) only one tribe among the 35 Manipuri tribes and Meitei writers alone cannot be studied as the representative voice. Instead of focusing on their poetic technique and the treatment of English language, I would attend to the content of their poems. The four male poets' concerns will be traced in terms of their involvement in political culture of Manipur from two perspectives relating to contemporary history of Manipur.

#### At Home: Coping with Democracy, Insurgency, Poverty and Drug

2. First perspective is connected with R.K Madhubir's *The Shadow of Darkness* (1998) and Arun Yumkham's *Reign of Terror* (2001), two poets whose poetic content is involved with the political scenario and human condition of Manipur in late 1980s and 90s. Their poems are not detached satires but raw, suffered voices, indicative of the experiences of tortured souls. Post-independent Manipur saw the reduction of monarchy to a titular status. The power of the king had already been diminished after British empire took it over in 1891. The king was still feared and respected during over 50 years of British colonialism. But, after merger with Indian union, the king was reduced to the state of a commoner. One can say that the king was gone and every commoner began to think that s/he was a king and a queen and took things in their own hands. The new world put the people in the middle of the storm of confusion and had no idea where it was heading. The idea of democratic self-government filled the vacuum left by monarchy's titular status. In 1950s, literacy rate was 12 per cent, meaning almost 90 per cent of the population, the silent uneducated masses, did not know the meaning or mechanism of democracy. By 1970, literacy rate had increased up to 38 per cent. Manipur got statehood in 1972 and everyone thought it was moving towards a bright stable future. Every five years, election continued non-stop despite occasional breaks of President Rule. In the 90s, literacy touched almost 60 per cent. In postcolonial Manipur, this pocket-size section of literate people has grown larger (still growing) and this increase in literacy leads to acceptance of modern outlook, lifestyle and more acceptance of democratic governance.

3. In democracy, a common man's vote is the same as that of the king. Democracy, a people's government, sounded so attractive yet it wasn't exactly a people's government as a small minority of powerful people still exploited it by working only for themselves rather than for the masses. In 'Democracy' (*Reign of Terror*), Arun Yumkham perceived it as a beautiful lady and told us about his recent discovery, 'her loveliness I never knew', and he thought it would "bloom in People's heart" and "Like moonlight she shone". It is not that they want to go back to the old monarchical order of things. People were questioning the new

order of things with suspicion. The soft lady with melodious voice in the first stanza turned into a crafty, manipulative lady in the next stanza:

Audacious suspicion's raising,  
Turned the leaves of Lexicon,  
Expression seemed incorrect,  
Surprised by anxiety, impatient as tide;  
*Xanthippatic* propagandas flew,  
She resembled a minx.

In fact, she is made to look like a crafty, manipulative woman (due to poor application of the system or the tiny intelligentsia's manipulation). The third stanza shows us her good qualities: majestic, sweet-smelling spruce, peaceful and "as celibate as basil". The fate of such a lady is:

But debauchers wheedled,  
Voodooed and deflowered her.

Some people with "vindictive intention", using "demoniacal threat" try to stop others from mentioning her name, "throats grappled by a giant hand" and "tied by the larcenous ropes", she "became a prisoner in (her) own room". Representatives of the people run the government after election. Ironically this very people do not trust the government. R.K Madhubir utters this very dilemma in his 'Song of a Pig':

The Government is secretly spying  
teasing and cheating the people  
proclaiming, everybody is enjoying freedom  
opening the offices day and night  
recording and recording and doing nothing  
nothing is doing but recording. (Song of a Pig)  
.....  
criminal leaders are driving the corrupt cars ("Knocking at my door")

4. Consolidation of the modern consciousness of the rising new middle class resulted in the weakening of the old cultural values. The power of the king became insignificant and culture, religion and society used to circle monarchy in the past now depended on individual beliefs, choices and memory. Those unsatisfied with the 200 years of Vaishnavite past tried to seek out the ancient way of life. Those who had no respect for both Vaishnavism and pre-Vaishnavite collective memory wanted to choose other alternatives. Some when confronted with different choices did not know what to do with their freedom. In short, people are caught in the junction of old conservative values, different religions and modern outlooks and lifestyles. R.K Madhubir's "Letter to my Father" in *Shadow of Darkness* shows us the changed social environment between Vaishnavite past (his father's time) and the new "everytarian" culture (the poet's time) which welcomes modern lifestyles with no respect for religion:

When you were alive  
your surroundings were ribboned by religious faith  
antique traditions and customs  
surrounded water-tightly.  
But the world is free now from those tidings.  
When you were alive

you didn't utter a single word  
 you didn't sip a drop of water  
 before you took morning ablutions  
 ...  
 and as you're religious bound by birth  
 you were a pure vegetarian.  
 But today everybody becomes everytarian.  
 Today, we take the morning tea in beds  
 chicken, mutton, beef and fish we eat  
 whisky, wine, gin and rum we drink.

In "Bye-bye Father! Forever!", the poet felt it was better for his father not to come back to this new world. Playing with the imagery of vegetarian (a respected Vaishnavite value) and non-vegetarian foods, similar sentiment is expressed by the poet in another poem, "Let us leave Mother"

Let us leave mother, our motherland today  
 The cows, the goats, the sheep are eating  
 red meat and fish, instead of greens  
 eating their mouthful, the bloody gristle.

5. New system of governance brings new ways of earning livelihood. Previous agriculturists become office goers. Population increases but the size of agricultural lands and lakes remain the same. Newly educated people look towards government for jobs but government jobs are very limited. Being a state with no industries or factories, mere survival becomes a big issue. The gap between the rich and the poor keep on widening. Men in lower-in-group, unable to face the reality, would either get fight with each other, beat their women or drunk to death. But woman with a mother's heart cannot escape family responsibility. The women with no farm fields to work on (or with bad married life) wander into illicit flesh trade and learn seduction skills and turn their body into a field for earning their livelihood. This trade flourishes secretly on the margin and in the crevices of the expanding main market in the centre of the town. This problem becomes the subject of Arun Yumkham's 'Rag Dolls'.

Fate made them (be at) fault,  
 Time became tough,  
 Poverty broke promises,  
 Slavery for survival,  
 Love turned laughable,  
 Seduction became their trade,  
 Exhibited the rentable privacies,  
 Bargained the tantalized chastity;  
 ....  
 Buyers vanquished the preys,  
 Fille de joies made big profits,  
 The bedaubed bodies sustained,  
 Astringency of imported customers;  
 Care-worn by tumultuous jaunts,  
 Rag-dolls never complain.

Illegality of this trade is not much of a secret as its visitors are intoxicated soldiers. sex workers work in neutral ground and customers are the same to them:

There is no division,  
 May be a Meitei, Mayang, Hao, Pangal...  
 All are equal to them;  
 Their religion is all money,  
 Prostitution is their devotion.

If they are caught by the local police, they will let them do it in the moving vehicles for free. But the mind of the women is occupied with the thought:

My starved children?  
 My little brother?  
 My weak mother?

6. If not fallen into the flesh trade, some women suffer in different ways. With callousness, some wealthy people play with the mind and body of the women and continue to exploit their helplessness. These women, not powerful enough to question the patriarchal setup, and sometimes accepting it as natural, keep taking it passively, suffering it silently without raising their voices. R.K Madhubir's "The Song not Listened" talks about such incapacitating women's situation. A wealthy man with four spouses had an affair with Memma,

the gentle and charming maiden  
 who greeted each and every one...  
 but lost her chastity and lost her virginity.

She is now with an illegitimate son. When the man had enough of her, he ditched her and lusted after Memcha, "the tender and younger sister of Memma", "the flower before it blossoms" and

He gave her sweets and garments often,

visited temples and hotels together.

When he had enough of her, he abandoned her too. Now Memcha survived in a garden full of paper flower. Songs of their silent suffering do not reach the ears of people as the victims do not have the power to sing about it.

7. A tiny section of Manipuris used to take *kani* (opium) in the past but it was not much of a problem then. In the early 80s, a new drug called Heroin No. 4 infiltrated from Myanmar (then, Burma) into the land and became available in every local den. Drug menace ate into the backbone of the society, that's, youth, and it spread fear in the mind and heart of every right-thinking parents. Young people succumbed to the harmful pleasure of drugs and destroyed their own lives and gave untold suffering to families and dear ones. Arun Yumkham's "Lie" was written when he saw a graffiti – "Don't impose yourself in Chinese opium war' in mid 80s. He calls this drug menace a storm that "took a thousand lives " and "destroy our siblings."

Youth became plunderers.  
 Their religion's their powder,  
 Everybody was going insane.

.....  
 My friend committed suicide,  
 He is free from hellish bondage;  
 His girl stood shedding tears,  
 The unmarried widow,  
 With her unborn (child) in womb.

My cousin was behind bars,  
 Paddled his lethal chattel,  
 His food was the dilution,  
 Transformed himself (into) living dead,  
 The king of narcotics  
 Strolled in his veins.

Helplessly, the poet only witnesses them slowly descending to their death. He cannot stop them from taking the drug, 'the slow poison in their veins' adulterating the juice of life itself. What is even more painful is that he cannot do anything about it. Taking drug was not simply about looking cool. The big picture behind it was the deteriorating social condition which produces insecurities, low self-esteem and depression early in the mind of the vulnerable youth. They wanted to escape from the traumatic reality and ease their pain. Even today, the war-against-drug is going on, burning acres and acres of poppy plantation in the hills and there are reports of drug-peddlers being caught with drugs worth crores of rupees in international market. The difference is that in the past, we were consumers. Now, we are both its suppliers and consumers.

8. Then, there is the violent insurgency movement in the late 70s started by a section of the society that believed Manipur merged with India in 1949 by proxy. It set off armed conflict (which is still active) and it brought back the Armed Forces Special (Powers) Act, 1958. For decades, the state actors and non-state (or anti-state) actors have been playing a cat and mouse game, killing hundreds of innocent people as collateral damage. In the 80s people could not sleep if they did not hear gun shot. That's why, R.K Madhubir cries:

Tens of thousands of guns were fired  
 Without a pause from every direction  
 Pillar, wall, the entire roof is perforated  
 But my dog sleeps on, doesn't bark. ("Whose Home")

In the late 80s, factions were born out of a single revolutionary group and over differences (individual, power or ideological) they butchered each other. R.K Madhubir expressed his sorrow in "Let us leave Mother" written in 1991:

All those ones, once so acquainted  
 as brothers, sisters, lovers and friends  
 so lovingly helped each other,  
 now, all of them have become Pandavas and Kauravas,  
 glaring at each other on the fields. ("Let us leave Mother")  
 .....  
 The ponds, the lakes, the rivers, once so quiet and calm  
 are full with red-hot blood.

Madhubir's mention of Pandavas and Kauravas probably indicates the bloody infighting among insurgents. On top of that, police killing the insurgents or insurgents killing police was nothing more than fratricide. Every living being in his motherland has turned carnivorous and "the shrill sound of vultures" shattered his ear. Motherland has become an inhabitable place and that's why he tells his mother that they should leave. But the paradox is that they do not know where to go. As they have no other place to go, they surrender to the decree of fate.

## Away from Home: Dynamics of Migrant

9. The powerlessness of the poet and his mother to leave their motherland and its associated sentiment takes me to the second perspective. Since the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, Manipuris have been going to other states of India for different reasons: business, pleasure, pilgrimage and education but the number is countable by fingers. In 1980s, many had started going outside home for education and some didn't come back. Main reason for going outside was partly educational. Main reason was that parents wanted to save their children from the drug menace, from becoming insurgents in the heat of anger, from becoming an innocent victim of crossfire between Army-Police and armed rebels, or being caught by the police on mere suspect or tortured for being a sympathizer of revolutionaries. Unlike Madhubir's mother and son, some do manage to leave the troubled state.

10. In *The Desire for Roots*(2006), Robin S Ngangom's "Revolutionaries" in poetic prose tells us that he "grew up with revolutionaries" and how

Before the crackling fire of revolution which warms the  
hearts of boys we sat in a circle and talked endlessly about oppressors  
and life in the jungle.

And how the poet flirted with the "little books with a star and red skins" and nearly became one himself. But his father sent him

to another land with  
gentle hills, so that I can read other books which will  
make me stand on my bourgeois feet.

Though normally the expiry date of a revolutionary is very short, some managed to exploit it to their material gain like the poet's friend, the revolutionary, who went underground, then became overground. Should he be thankful to his father that he escaped the short life of a revolutionary or be envious of his revolutionary friend's new avatar as an avaricious contractor? His friend has changed his political strategy, his self-sacrificing patriotism has turned into a money-making project. Now he

smelled of designer clothes. He now keeps himself  
occupied with work contracted out to the public works  
department and once asked me if I were married. He has  
two wives, one of them an actor.

Following similar sentiment, in "When You Do Not Return", the poet says

When you leave your native land  
messianic young men betray principles,  
and there's no fire in their eyes.  
In the streets students shout themselves  
Hoarse for new-ly arrived patriots. The  
right and the left have come synonymous,  
and the citizens garland only the thieves.

While he is away, his beloved home has become a place of "sorrow and blood" and entered "the era of the assassin":

11. In "Native Land", Robin S Ngangom's persona in the poem is that of someone who after settling down in another peaceful state for years, after staying away from the immediate problems of his home state, suddenly hears terrible news from home:

Six shot dead, twenty-five  
Houses razed, sixteen beheaded with hands tied  
Behind their backs inside a church...

The word 'church' indicates that he is probably referring to the Naga-Kuki feud in the hills in 1992 or the Kuki-Paite clashes in 1997. If he'd lived in his home town, he could have absorbed it with a feeling of impotent helplessness felt by R.K Madhubir. But the persona is in another place, another world, his reaction is different. He at least manages to

I hardened inside my thickening hide,  
until I lost my tenuous humanity.

Despite hardening himself, he could not help visualizing the inhuman cruelty "their soft bodies mown down/ like grain stalk during their lyric harvests", and then he said "I don't care anymore". Such horrible news brings back old memories which he rather no digs up again without disturbing his peaceful stable bourgeois life: "I burnt my truth with them/ and buried my uneasy manhood with them". At least, he is able to bury them and distanced himself from the immediate violence. That's why, he continues to live "as if nothing happened."

12. In the 80s, only the rich managed to send their children outside the state for studies. In the 90s and 2000s, children from medium and lower income groups have joined the race. In the meantime, the population which was just below 6

lakhs in 1952 jumped up to 23 lakhs in 2001. In 2001, literacy rate has gone beyond 70 percent and the number of unemployed literate youth has touched 7 lakhs. Children who go outside their home as students decide or hope to stay back in their migrant state as employees, big or small, in different status and category. Manipur's geographical remoteness, political bleakness, absence of infrastructure growth, lack of incentives for private enterprise participation, poor trade prospects and non-stop law and order situation, drive educated youth away to other states to seek financial security. They want to break with the past and their disturbed home-state.

13. Duncan MaDuie-Ra in *Northeast Migrants in Delhi* (2012) stated that migration provides insights into the changes taking place in the Northeast itself. Many migrants leave home for many reasons: to escape conflict, to find work, to pursue education, and to fulfil changing aspirations. As a result, Northeasterns' perception of the Indian heartland is changing. The trust deficit of the past and present is still there but is lessened by a mixture of necessity and opportunity. Indian cities are also changing. "The liberalisation of the Indian economy over the past two decades and the (partial) embrace of consumerism among the burgeoning middle classes have created new spaces for consumption and investment, often critiqued for creating an exclusionary city." (14) Yet Northeast migrants seek the employment opportunities in these spaces and employers in these spaces want Northeast labour. "Northeast migrants engage in place-making practices by building neighbourhoods and religious communities. They protest the ways they are treated in the city and take the opportunity of being in the national capital to protest injustices back home. The 'Northeast map' of Delhi is a collage of urban spaces where migrants have established a presence in order to navigate, negotiate, and survive the city. In doing so, Northeasterners enact complex and multi-layered identities." (14)

14. But finding their place in a bigger city, say, Delhi or Bangalore or Chandigarh, is not an easy thing because thousands of migrants from all parts of India came there for the same reason: looking for new opportunities. In "City Work", *Chandigarh Seasons* (2013), I tried to express the different feelings and difficult situations which many of my friends, including myself, were going through:

The muscular city breathes hard & fast  
Pumping its iron ambitions routinely.  
I was one with its sweat & meat once.  
I expected to burn all past baggage.  
I jogged to keep dream-heart strong.  
I walked on its sun-burnt highway  
To see the forbearance of my bare self  
To test the longevity of my heartbeat.

Out of the battlefield of home, you rush into another battlefield. You have to be ready for everything.

I let the hard city penetrate my virginity  
Without a drop of tear, a sigh or cry.

.....  
Now city hands washing raw lives cleanly.  
Crush them in their indefatigable machine  
24 x 7 & sell glass after glass of juicy hopes.  
From one stop to another it drives on daily.  
I hold on to its crowded dream lest I fall  
In the middle of the road. For months I've been  
Hoping to slip out unnoticed in the next stop.  
Still I am here, (in)significant like another bolt. ("City Work")

Sometimes you wanted to give up but you stayed put. It was significant for you though insignificant in the eye of the city. Likewise, "Initiation" is about toughening up to face the violent city that understand only the language of money:

The city cooked you raw, your innocent world,  
Then sucked you out of your shell with the pull  
Of a deep breath that reeks of money & diesel.  
... be  
Hard like the hard world, its rope & noose  
Prepared for all the wild dreams running  
Berserk in the jungle of doors & buildings,  
Roads & traffic, stairs & terraces, realities & images,  
Speed & accidents, markets & rational animals.

15. Finding a job is nothing short of winning a war. Your poor parents at home wonder what you are doing. You have run out of excuses and you keep updating your resume. In "Jobless" I attempt to address this situation.

In checkered spaces, unfulfilled ambitions  
Like crossword puzzle stare long at you  
Without any hint of recognition. Each blank  
Square demands experienced vocabulary of

City-existence. Can't even hope for the  
 Certainty of answer on tomorrow's paper.  
 Guarantee-less living, shoeless lives  
 Walking on hot lane, keep looking for  
 The right clue, the right connection,  
 The right reference, the exact letter,  
 The precise word, the lucky break.

Being someone from the North-east states, with a different face, accent and an unknown history, it becomes tougher. No connection, no references, you have only certificates and your personality to prove your worth:

With specs resting on nose-tip, the day  
 Looks at your half-page long CV, studies  
 The photo of your Mongoloid face and  
 Weighs history. You wait for the judgement  
 Dangling between humiliation & acceptance.  
 You think of your old man at home who  
 Sitting on the verandah listening to the  
 Monsoon on the rusted zinc roof waits  
 For good news from you. You pass by  
 APCO every hour, but haven't called  
 Him for months.

But you do not want to give up. The condition at home is harsher.

..... You're ready to work  
 Like a silverfish while the thesaurus of  
 Unemployment grows bigger every day. ("Jobless")

16. After staying in the city for some years, through a persona I spy out the underlying mechanism of the city, its consumerist materialism and capitalist aspirations in "Orchid Life".

I see through the disco of your fantasies,  
 Showrooms of your needs, fast-foods of  
 Your desires, hoardings of your appetite:  
 The rising discontentment concealed in  
 Your learned footsteps, in the confidence of  
 Your exposed midriff, in the way your costly  
 Shoe toe extinguishes the fiery cigarette buds.  
 You guard your honour in AC apartments,  
 You cover up your fear with flashy cars and  
 Imposing edifices, your vulgarity with  
 Sophisticated etiquette and branded wishes. ("Orchid Life")  
 .....  
 You make them love you, covet you. They  
 Love you, covet you, want you, only you.

For a small-town boy, who wants to forget the nightmares of his provinciality, it all seems so attractive though he cannot possess it all. He knows the limits of his ambition. So, he thinks he is a part of it in small ways and it is fine with him.

Each night and day, living out of a small  
 Branch of a city, I keep trying somehow  
 To grow like an orchid, uncertain yet beautiful. ("Orchid Life")

Orchid is an exotic, colourful plant that need a stem or branch of a tree to grow or survive. The city is that branch or tree, and without that support, the life of narrator is uncertain yet by becoming a part of that branch, it wants to add to its beauty.

17. Even after settling down in another city, away from the intimate woes of the place of your birth, one cannot sever oneself from it completely. Every news, good or bad, touches raw nerves. One carries home, or the memory of home, in one's heart and it is a part of the private and poetic identity of a migrant poet. It has become a common sight to see protests by migrants in Delhi and it alludes to "a growing level of confidence among migrants in voicing their discontent and advocating for justice. Protests are also expressions of Northeast identity" (MaDuie-Ra, 160). In "Everywhere I go", Robin S. Ngangom, a voice of the internal diaspora, succinctly catches the feeling:

Everywhere I go  
 I carry my homeland with me.  
 I look for it in protest marches on the streets of the capital,  
 .....  
 I harbour the wretchedness of those youths  
 who do not wish to return  
 but would rather serve in a city's sordid restaurants  
 because devils and thieves rule their home.

The streets and hills of his old hometown are full of happenings of injustice and cruelty, of violence over tribal ethnic identity and demands for tiny separate homelands. To the poet, they reach as news only. They still hurt him. In course of

time, he has learnt to deal with it and take refuge in nostalgia.

I must stop agonizing or save what I can  
 Such as the tunes of my homeland  
 Which dance in my blood.

#### REFERENCES

1. Madhubir, R.K.(1998). *The Shadows of Darkness*. Imphal: Vagya Pub.
2. MaDuie-Ra, Duncan.(2012). *Northeast Migrants in Delhi: Race, Refuge and Retail*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press.
3. Ngangom, S, Robin.(2019). *The Desire for Roots*. New Delhi: Red River. 2006 (1st Pub).
4. Sharma, Sanamacha.(2013) *Chandigarh Seasons*. New Delhi: Authorspress.
5. Yumkham, Arun. (2001). *Reign of Terror*. Imphal: M.C Thoiba.